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*THE SPIRIT OF ST. DUNSTAN'S*



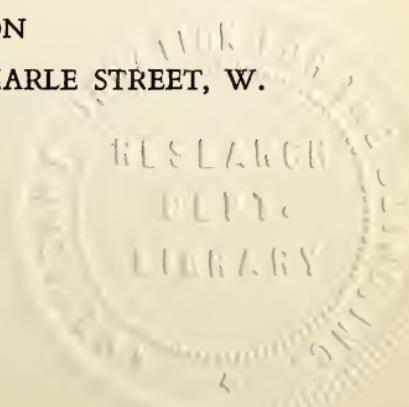
THE SPIRIT OF  
ST. DUNSTAN'S

---

V. M. DUCHÉ

WITH A PREFACE BY  
SIR IAN FRASER, C.B.E.

LONDON  
JOHN MURRAY, ALBEMARLE STREET, W.



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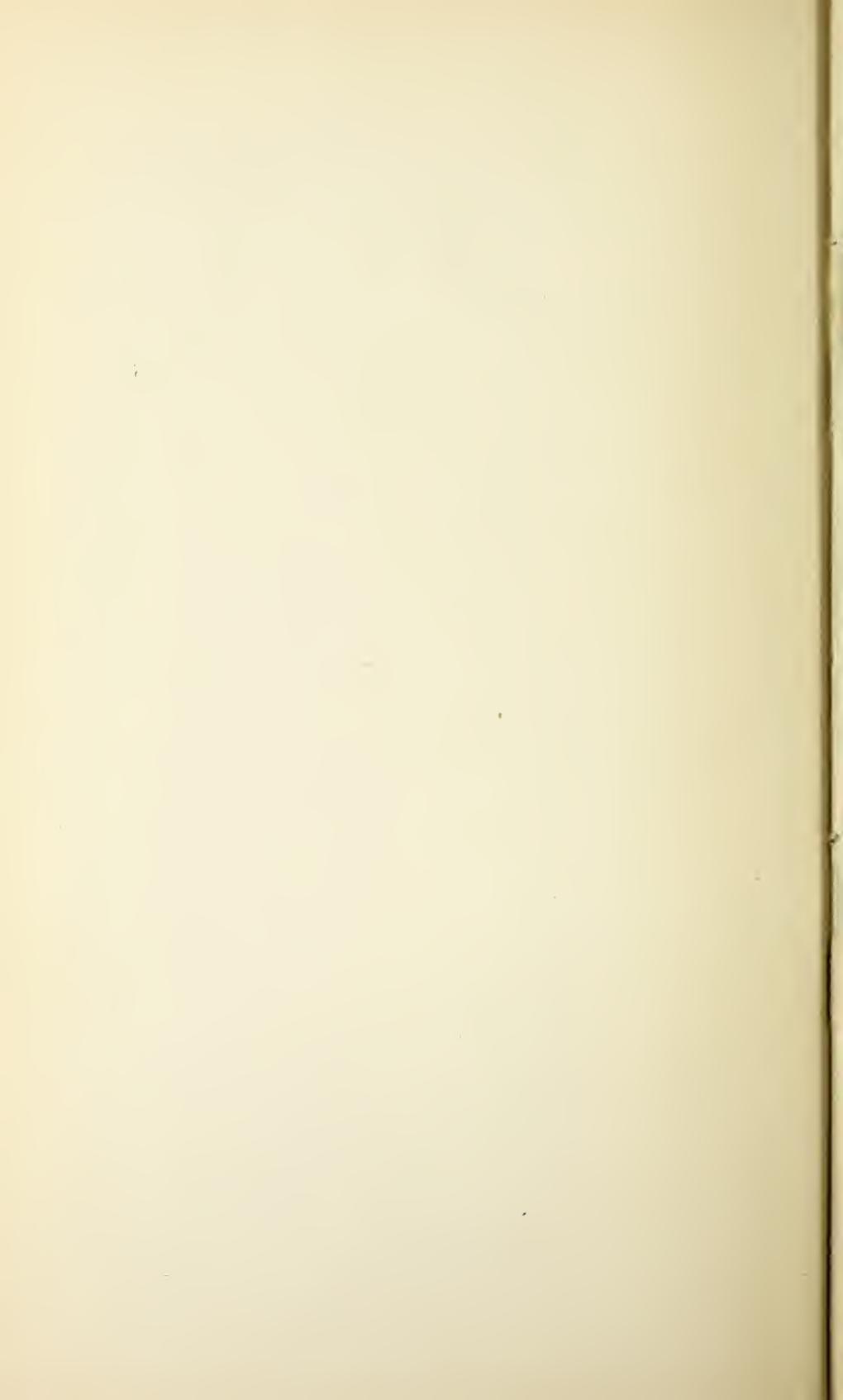
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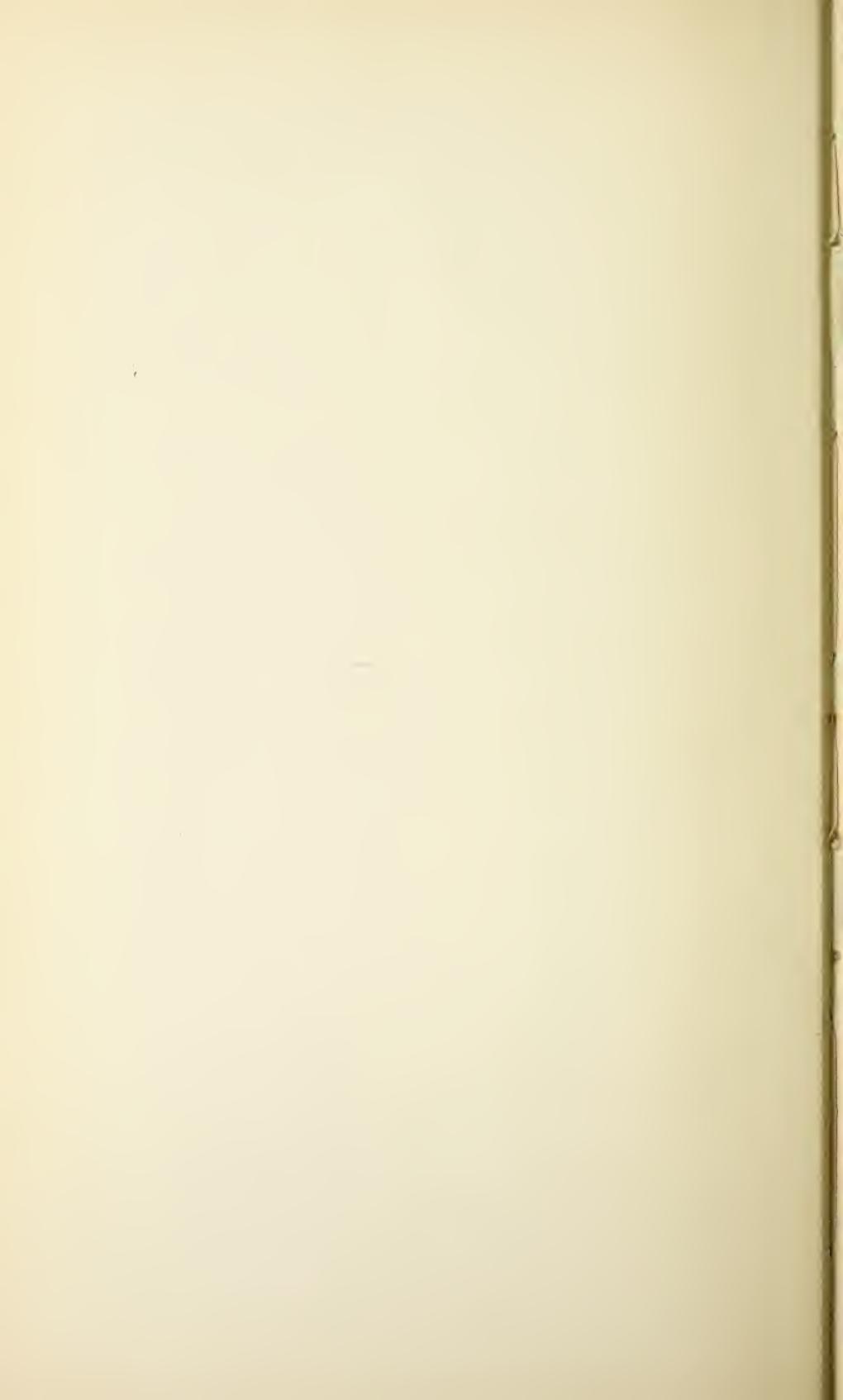
*To*

*MY HUSBAND*



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## *PREFACE*

THESE charming and lifelike studies were written by a girl of eighteen who was a V.A.D. at St. Dunstan's during the War years. She came voluntarily every day to teach braille to the newly blinded men, having mastered this difficult art herself for the purpose.

Our blinded soldiers, sailors and airmen, who still number nearly two thousand, are now in their forties. Then they were eighteen or nineteen years of age, or in their early twenties.

Now they are spread all over this country and the Empire, living in their own homes, pursuing a wide variety of occupations—professional, commercial and industrial. They have learned to be blind ; they are useful members of society ; they are happy. This is the miracle of St. Dunstan's.

Then they were fresh from the fields of France and Flanders, the deserts of the Near East, or the blue waters. Everything that their young lives held out before them seemed to have gone. As Miss Duché says, a curtain seemed to have fallen and blotted out all the brightness of the future.

St. Dunstan's was a haven of rest after the battle-

## *PREFACE*

field, and a house where wounds might heal and a new life full of ambition and activity be started. Still in Regent's Park, though not in the old mansion, it is now a widespread organisation whose helping hand stretches out to the blinded soldier in his home wherever in the world he may live. In pain, in need, in success or failure, in all the trials and tribulations of the day-to-day life, St. Dunstan's helps him materially and the spirit of St. Dunstan's sustains him.

I was with them in 1916 at St. Dunstan's, for it was in that year that I was myself wounded in the same way as they, so that I can testify from personal experience.

No single factor contributed more to our new view of life than the understanding and sometimes affection of these girls and young women whom we called collectively, V.A.D.'s. Quietly they moved amongst us, tending our daily needs, keeping their heads when we were losing ours, acting as lightning-conductors for the flashes of anger and despair that from time to time seemed to overwhelm us, calming frayed nerves, teaching us to read and write, bringing us back to normality. This aspect of St. Dunstan's will be remembered by all the blinded officers and men, and by the hundreds of V.A.D.'s who so freely gave their services, many of them "for the duration." It may be of interest to many others who did not

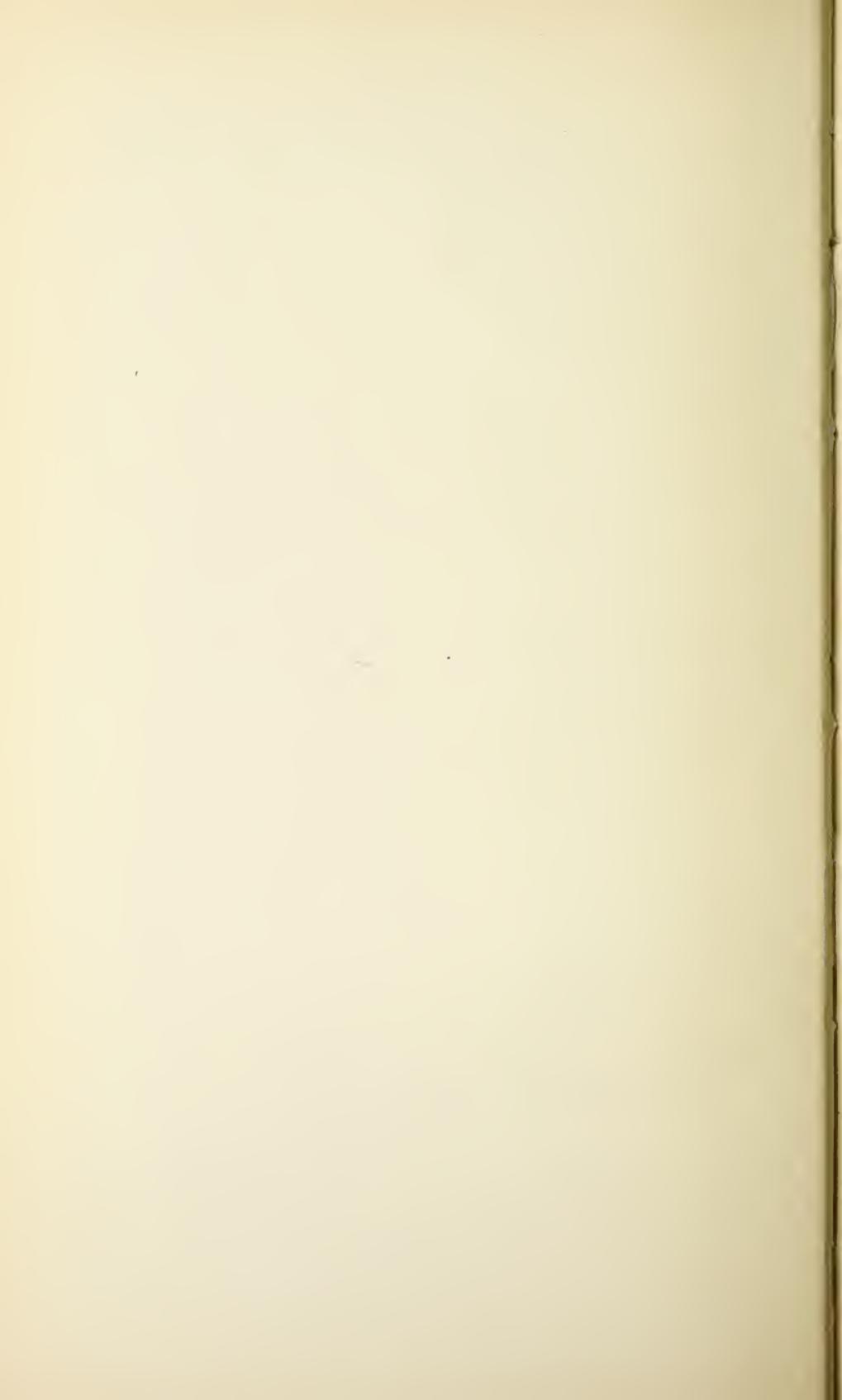
*PREFACE*

take part in St. Dunstan's but admired or admire St. Dunstan's men, to catch a glimpse of this aspect of life at the Home during those terrible years.

In a well-equipped treatment room will be found a tall, strong yet gentle practitioner of Osteopathy. He is quite blind, but he is as successful in the extent of his practice and the contribution he makes to the healing art as any in the medical quarter of London. His charm and personal skill and experience have contributed to this, but so has the help given him during the last twenty years, and particularly perhaps during the first twenty months of those days at St. Dunstan's, by Miss Duché. They married in 1919. They lived happily ever after. I cannot think of a better story than this.

IAN FRASER.

*August 1938.*



## ST. DUNSTAN'S

THE old mansion that was St. Dunstan's no longer exists. It has been pulled down. In its place a modern mansion has been built. But neither the hands of men, nor Time can destroy it, for it dwells for ever in the memory of those who knew it.

Situated in Regent's Park, it was, during the War, the Home of the blinded soldiers. It boasted of no particular architecture, but it was spacious and had a friendly look about it.

Closing my eyes, I can still see the lounge with its French windows overlooking the grounds ; the famous old clock that boomed the passing of the hours ; the terrace where the men paced up and down, the lawns leading to the workshops and braille room, the lake that was its boundary, and the rose garden. . . .

I shall never forget that corner of St. Dunstan's one fine afternoon in June. The roses were in full bloom, the air was fragrant with them, and the bees hummed merrily.

And I saw two soldiers walking towards me, arm-in-arm, and I thought : is all this loveliness lost to them ? will they nevermore enjoy this sunshine, this turquoise sky, nature in all her glory ? . . .

*But to my joy, they suddenly stood still, and one of them, nudging the other, exclaimed: "It's good to be alive, eh, Bill!"*

*Bill agreed, and continuing their walk, they burst into song, singing lustily "Roses of Picardy."*

*I smiled, and my eyes filled with tears as I followed them out of sight, and their voices faded away in the distance. . . .*

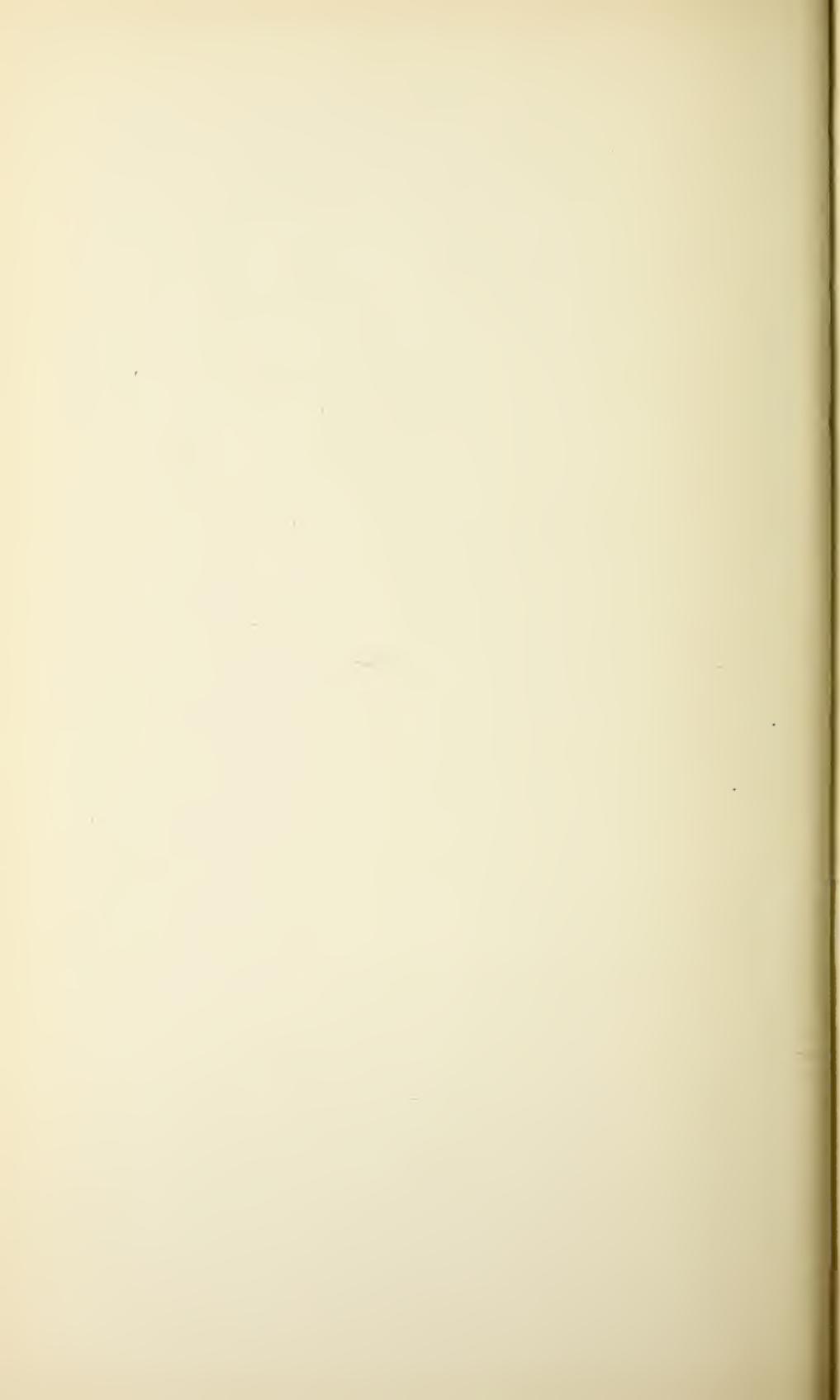
*And so it was ever at St. Dunstan's, happiness and sorrow so closely intermingled; for suffering had passed that way, and in her wake she had left a fragrance such as the scent of roses, and a mystical light shining on all faces, that was joy attained through sacrifice.*

THE following are sketches of some of the men I have known at St. Dunstan's. As their example has been such an inspiration to me in my life, my hope is that this little book may also hold a message for those who come across these pages ; and I would like to express my grateful thanks to John Murray, Sir Ian Fraser, and Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Langley for the kindly interest they have taken in its fate.



*HELDAR*

B



I HAVE arrived early, on a delightful September morning, and from the terrace where we give braille lessons I watch the men as they go to their work. I am waiting for my new pupil, and just as the old clock strikes ten, he appears, walking briskly towards me, accompanied by Sister Dorothy. She is young and pretty in her blue dress and white apron ; and he too is young and very tall, but I cannot distinguish his features, for a khaki bandage covers his eyes.

"Heldar, here is your braille teacher," she says in her clear voice, and turning to me : "Your pupil, as keen as mustard, eh, Heldar ?"

He blushes, for it is embarrassing to be seen without seeing, but as I grip his outstretched hand, he smiles pleasantly.

"I am afraid you will need the patience of an angel to teach *me* braille."

"I think we shall both need patience," I reply, and leading him to the table that awaits us on

the terrace, I feel as though we were already old friends.



At twelve o'clock our lesson is at an end. Together we put away the books and the machine. And as this is his first mental effort, since he was wounded, I suggest a walk in the garden. He slips his arm through mine, and we take the little path leading down to the lake. . . .

Under the spell of autumn, St. Dunstan's is like Fairyland.

Giant trees spread their golden branches over the water ; crimson and russet leaves fall into it and glide along like little sailing-boats, gently propelled by the breeze.

Heldar asks if he may smoke, and lighting a cigarette :

“I'm glad I decided to come to St. Dunstan's. . . . I hesitated for a long time . . . but I felt so lonely at home.”

And after a moment of silence :

“I was happy, of course, when they were all around me, but when I was alone, I couldn't bear it. I HATE solitude.”

There is rebellion in his voice as he breathes these

last words, and gazing at him there, in the fullness of his youth, I understand the horror they must convey to him.

SOLITUDE.

A dark prison from which there is no escape.

"Your decision to come to St. Dunstan's was very wise," I tell him, "for here you will learn to make a fresh start, to be independent, and no longer to fear loneliness."

"Will I ever learn braille?" he asks quizzically, and the humorous raising of his eyebrows tells me that depression, his arch-enemy, has already fled.

"You will learn it in RECORD time, if you put your mind to it. . . . Will you, Heldar?"

"I shall TRY to do you credit," he replies, and with this ambitious goal in view, we cheerfully resume our stroll.



The zeal of Heldar has become legendary.

In class, he is always the first to arrive, and invariably the last to leave.

When he has worked very hard, we have a rest, and he smokes, while I eat the sweets he brings me each day.

He tells me about his life before the War, and his

face lights up as he recalls his adventures and his travels.

When the War broke out he was one of the first to enlist : “ You see, I didn’t want to miss anything,” he remarks wistfully . . .

He rarely speaks of his war experiences, but once he described to me the battle in which he was hit.

Then back again to his life in hospital, where they fussed over him as though he were a “ new-born babe,” and he adds with a smile :

“ Those are our little compensations. The world suddenly finds us worthy of interest.”



I have discovered he has a passion for chocolates, so now I often bring him some of my own confection. So greatly are they appreciated, that I have given him the recipe, and this morning, on returning from his week-end, he has presented me with a box, containing three rows of wonderful truffles !

“ Have you made these yourself ? ” I ask incredulously.

“ I have,” and proud as Punch, he relates his misadventures.

"First of all, I thought they were burning, so I hastily withdrew them from the stove ; then, as I was about to roll them into balls, the mixture refused to harden. Following your instructions, I took them into the garden, hoping the cool air would do the trick, and promptly it began to rain."

With the seriousness of a connoisseur, I taste one of these home-made wonders, while he adds apologetically :

"I don't suppose they are quite up to standard . . . but *you* wait till next time !"

But *I* think they are marvellous, since they have kept him happily occupied for a whole morning.



This morning, as I congratulated him on a faultless dictation, an unexpected smile spread over his face.

"I think I'd better make a confession," he volunteers. "When in the past I've made mistakes, often I've made them on purpose."

"Come, Heldar, you can hardly expect me to believe that !"

"It's the truth. . . . You see, I've come to enjoy my braille lessons so much, that I thought : 'Why hurry ?' It was fun too, to be scolded by you."

And before I can protest, he is suddenly penitent.  
“Forgive me, I realise I haven’t been playing the game . . . from now onward, I am going to do my best.”

And so earnest is he in his resolution, that less than a fortnight later he is ready to take his test.

★ ★ ★

Anxiously we await the result, and one day, at last, he rings me up on the telephone.

“Hullo . . . Is that you, Sister ?”

“Yes . . . Is that you, Heldar ?”

“Don’t you recognise my attractive voice ?”

And after a pause : “Alas ! prepare to hear the worst.”

I hold my breath.

“What is it ? . . . You don’t mean to say you’ve failed ?”

“I’m afraid so. . . . Are you very disappointed ?”

Naturally I am. He had done so well. What could have happened ? But while I’m cogitating, his mischievous laugh reaches me over the line.

“Sorry, Sister. It’s a hoax . . . I’ve passed with honours !”

“And do you expect me to congratulate you ?”

“I do,” he chuckles. . . . “Aren’t you going to ?”

“ Yes . . . but I don’t think you deserve it, after giving me such a shock ! ”



Next day he is full of remorse, and asks to be forgiven ; and as a proof of my forgiveness I tell him I have asked Sister Dorothy permission to celebrate. Instead of working this afternoon, we are going to the theatre.

“ To the theatre . . . this afternoon ? ”

The consternation in his voice makes me laugh.

“ Yes,” and handing him an envelope containing two tickets : “ What did you think we were going to do ? ”

“ I didn’t know. Only a minute ago I was thinking, ‘ Now my braille lessons are finished, Sister Violet will have new pupils, and forget all about me.’ ”

I scold him for having such thoughts, and lead him into the hall, where a taxi awaits us.

As we drive through the London streets, Heldar recalls that last time he went to the theatre, it was the eve of his sailing for France. “ There were fifty of us, who had been to the barber that morning, and when we made our appearance in the stalls, we were greeted with cheers.” He smiles reminiscently.

“No wonder . . . fifty shorn heads . . . we must have looked a sight !”

Instinctively I gaze at his well-shaped head, clear-cut against the light, and I notice that his hair has grown again, in crisp dark waves, but on the temples it is now quite white.

★      ★      ★

At the theatre, the lights gradually fade out. The curtain rises. The stage represents a drawing-room overlooking a garden, flooded in sunshine. A young girl enters, holding in her hand a letter. . . .

The audience watches her expectantly . . . but for Heldar all is dark, and leaning towards me, patiently he waits for me to describe him the scene.

After the play, which we have both enjoyed, I suggested having tea at the Carlton, as it is just across the road.

He chaffs me : “Don’t you do things grandly !”

But I beg him to stop teasing for I am scared of the roaring traffic and the jostling crowds, as we venture across the street.

★      ★      ★

The Carlton is packed. Every table is occupied. We will never find room.

## *HELDAR*

But Heldar's khaki bandage suddenly does wonders.  
Miraculously, a table is found for us. Waiters  
hover round us. We are treated like Royalty.

Glancing at his braille watch with satisfaction,  
he remarks : "The others are still working at St.  
Dunstan's," and this seems to enhance his pleasure.

But soon the place empties. In a few minutes it  
will be deserted, and now it is our turn to leave.

Already we are driving back to the big house whose  
lights twinkle in the distance.

Heldar sighs comically ; then thanks me for "one  
of the happiest days of his life."

I too sigh, as we take leave of each other, and going  
home by myself, I feel rather like a mother parting  
from her son, after a perfect exeat.

★ ★ ★

" Didn't you know he is engaged ? " Sister May  
asks me incredulously.

I shake my head.

" How should I know ? He never told me."

" But haven't you seen her ? She calls for him  
every Saturday, when he goes home, week-ends."

" I'm never here, myself, week-ends."

I ponder over this news, and at the first opportunity  
congratulate Heldar on his engagement.

“ Only, why didn’t you tell me the wonderful news yourself? I’ve prayed so often you might be happy that way.”

He detects a reproach in my voice, and blushes, and is silent.

“ I’ve often wanted to tell you,” he says at last. “ But for some unknown reason, I’ve changed my mind, thinking : ‘ There’s no hurry . . . I’ll tell her to-morrow.’ ”



Sitting near the fish-pond, on the old stone seat, he tells me his story ; not consecutively, but in bits that I piece together, like a puzzle.

I gather he and Minnie were friends from their earliest childhood. He had no sister, but because of Minnie he didn’t mind.

Sometimes, to please him, they played soldiers . . . and to please her, they played “ Mothers and Fathers.”

Minnie never forgot those games. . . .

But he did ; and as he grew up, he travelled, and had many adventures, and visited interesting places, and on his return he would tell her about them. . . .

And when the War broke out he enlisted as a

## *HELDAR*

Tommy, and Minnie wrote to him regularly, and sent him parcels and cigarettes.

"Will you be home for Christmas?" she anxiously asked, and confidently he replied :

"Don't worry . . . I shall be back for Christmas."

When Christmas and the New Year were spent in the trenches, he wrote :

"Cheer up, I shall be back for Easter."

And he was.

But wounded . . . and blind.

The shock is awful. He had not thought of that.

During months, he is desperate, he who was so gay. . . .

But, little by little, he takes courage.

He is resigned.

Looking around, he finds there are others worse off than himself.

Minnie visits him frequently. And later they go out together for walks. They never speak of the future that Heldar dreads, but often of the past.

"Do you remember, Minnie?"

And he recalls a hundred memories of their childhood which he thought he had forgotten. . . .

With the help of his staunch little friend he strives to become again the Heldar of long ago. . . .

He teases her, tells her the most dreadful stories,

only now the stories are true, and the imaginary hero is himself.

Minnie listens spellbound. She is so thrilled ; she dare not speak.

Oh ! When will he realise how much she loves him ? . . .



One day, however, she finds him alone, his face buried in his hands.

It is one of those awful days of depression, when life seems blacker than usual.

She kneels by his side, enfolds him in her arms . . . and out comes her secret.

Heldar had guessed it long ago, but because she convinces him to-day, that marrying him will be no sacrifice . . . he asks her, at last, to become his wife.



The date of his wedding is approaching. He has left St. Dunstan's, and we have just said Good-bye.

A hand-shake just a little prolonged ; a smile perhaps a little sad.

*HELDAR*

"Good-bye, Heldar. . . . Be happy always, won't you?"

"Good-bye, Sister. God bless you."

And now he is gone, but the memory of a very sweet friendship will remain with me, always.



*JINKS*

C



JINKS is sitting in a deck-chair, smoking his pipe,  
as I walk past him.

"Hullo, Jinks . . . Sister Violet speaking."

He looks up, and taking out of his pocket an envelope : "Have you time to read me this letter ?"

"Yes, I have time."

Sitting next to him in a vacant chair, I read as I am bid. The letter is from his mother, on the occasion of his birthday, and although she writes simply, one is aware of the deep affection existing between these two.

Having read the letter aloud, I hand it back to him.

"So you are twenty-three to-day, Jinks ! Many happy returns of the day."

"Thanks ! ! ! "

The word contains such bitterness, that for the moment I am disconcerted.

Presently, he volunteers :

"I don't mean to be ungracious . . . but mine is a birthday I'd prefer to forget . . . for I was hit that day, exactly twelve months ago."

I tell him :

“I’m sorry . . . I didn’t know.”

This is the first time he has mentioned his blindness, and I am glad he feels inclined to speak . . . for sooner or later, they must “get it off their chest.” The sooner the better. . . . Yet I have known men, who have been here for months, without making a single allusion to the terrible experience that has shattered their life.

“Do you know, Sister, how I learned I was NEVER going to see again ?”

“No, I don’t . . . will you tell me ?”

He draws a deep breath, and endeavouring to speak in a matter-of-fact voice :

“I had been in hospital for days, unconscious, when one morning I seemed to awake from an awful nightmare.

“I had no recollection of the past, but I had an appalling headache, and a bandage covered my eyes. Perplexed by this strange occurrence, I was harmlessly fingering it, when a voice peremptorily forbade me to touch it.

“I was terrified, for I thought I was alone.

“Then the man who had spoken untied the bandage himself, and, to my horror, I realised I couldn’t see. I tried to rub my eyes to rid them of the darkness, but again the man spoke :

“ ‘ Hold him, Nurse, and don’t let him move.’

“ Then, he came closer to me so that I could feel his breath on my face. He lifted my eyelids, ran his steel-like fingers along the sockets. . . . And I knew then he was the surgeon, and I was in hospital.

“ ‘ Doctor . . . am I soon going to recover my sight ? ’

“ I was a fool to put the question so bluntly, but I hardly deserved the answer I got, for laying his hand on my shoulder, he blurted out, without preamble :

“ ‘ My boy . . . I’m afraid you will never recover your sight.’

“ Had he struck me, I should have been less stunned. As it was, I lay speechless, shocked to the very depth of my being. . . . Then a fury of which I’m normally incapable, took possession of me. I leapt out of bed, and would have killed the man whose verdict seemed to have destroyed my life. But my legs were too weak to support me, and I fell like a log at his feet.”

Jinks was silent for a moment, then moistening his lips :

“ Two days elapsed before I regained consciousness. Then, gradually my memory returned, and I started reconstructing the past, until it became an obsession.

“ I saw myself again at Ypres, in our trench. We

had been told to attack, and at a given signal I ‘ went over ’ with the rest.

“ Half-way across no-man’s-land, I was hit ; I fell backwards in a shell-hole. Two or three men tumbled over me, blood trickled over my face, my limbs ached ; I felt I was being suffocated. . . .

“ I don’t know how long I remained in that condition, but at last I determined to get away.

“ Around me all was silent and dark, but it was a weird and uncanny darkness. Desperately I staggered forward, not caring where I went. I might have been making straight for the enemy lines. I didn’t care, and just as I was about to give in, a voice called through the night :

“ ‘ Halt. . . . Who goes there ? ’

“ ‘ Worcester . . . wounded,’ I replied, and knowing at last I was safe, I collapsed in the arms of the sentinel . . . ”

Again Jinks paused, but I dare not speak. It was best he should say all that was on his mind.

“ These scenes haunted me for weeks. Day after day I lay in bed, refusing to take any interest in the world around me ; ignoring the surgeon who urged me to ‘ pull myself together,’ and the nurses who made feeble jokes. . . .

“ It was my mother who saved me.

“ One day they told me a very special visitor

## *JINKS*

had called to see me. Before even she spoke, I knew who it was. Her presence was like a balm. It healed my bitterness. She sat by me, held my hand ; told me of the plans she had made for my future ; I was to come to St. Dunstan's, mix with others who had been blinded like myself, learn braille, and farming . . . and whereas before, life had seemed hopeless, like a blank wall I could never hope to scale . . . now, it held a new meaning."

Jinks sighed. He drew his pipe out of his pocket, lit it deftly between his cupped hands, and began puffing at it, meditatively . . .

The silence between us was friendly now, as when an angel is passing, so I rose from my chair, and giving his hand a squeeze, left him with his thoughts, quietly smoking his pipe.



*GINGER*



I JOINED a merry group of men of which Ginger is the centre, and asked the cause of so much hilarity.

“ Why, Sister . . . you’re just in time to hear my latest exploit ! ” exclaimed Ginger, beaming at me in his engaging manner.

Although his eyes are closed, they always give me the impression of being blue, star-blue like forget-me-nots. His hair falls in copper curls all over his forehead ; his nose is snub ; and his mouth widens in a perpetual grin.

I drew closer to the group, and sitting next to one of the men who had made room for me, waited for Ginger to embark upon his tale.

“ Well,” he began, smacking his lips gleefully, “ yesterday, as you remember, was visiting day at St. Dunstan’s, and a memorable day it was, for we were honoured by the visit of His Majesty the King.

“ As this august personage was to visit the braille room, and I’m one of the ‘ star turns ’ in dot reading, I trembled lest I be asked to demonstrate my skill.

Modest as a violet, I had but one wish : to remain in the shade, unnoticed. . . .

“ At four o’clock, however, in the middle of my braille lesson, the door was suddenly thrown open, and an ominous hush descended upon the room.

“ Sister May clutched my arm convulsively, and in a loud whisper informed me : the King.

“ We all stood to attention, I standing particularly rigid, in the hope of concealing my nervousness.

“ After a moment, His Majesty graciously intimated that we be seated, and I, still trembling like a leaf, resumed my lesson.

“ Sister May patted my hand encouragingly.

“ ‘ Don’t be nervous, Ginger . . . it’s quite all right. . . . He’s nowhere near us.’

“ But hardly had she made this reassuring statement than once again she clutched my arm.

“ ‘ Ginger,’ she hissed, ‘ he’s coming this way. . . . Now is the time to distinguish yourself.’ And turning suavely to someone immediately behind me :

“ ‘ This is McIllyn, Sire, one of our most promising pupils. . . . Now, Ginger, please read . . . and don’t be nervous ! ’ ”

His imitation of Sister May was so excellent, that the men greeted it with whoops of delight. Imperturbably, he proceeded :

“ Of course, I completely lost my head. My mind

went blank, and for a hideous moment I forgot even the alphabet. . . . Then, a strange lucidity took possession of my brain, and to my own astonishment I began to improvise. . . .

“I can still see my fingers gliding along the lines, like a sledge gliding on ice . . . on thin ice,” he added wryly, “and although inwardly I was quaking at the idea of remaining ‘stuck,’ a voice I hardly recognised as my own continued its incredible improvisation !

“The King marvelled, and placing his hand on my shoulder, congratulated me warmly on my amazing fluency. . . . Then, regally, he passed on. . . .

“For a moment, I remained petrified ; then the tension relaxed, and I began shaking with silent and uncontrollable mirth.

“Sister May gaped at me in horror.

“‘Ginger,’ she faltered reproachfully, ‘how could you resort to such a stratagem . . . you, my brightest pupil ?’

“But I protested. I told her I thought I had given a remarkable performance ! . . . Don’t you ?”

A further guffaw greeted this impudent sally, while Ginger, digging his hands in his pockets, walked away whistling “God Save the King.”



## *THE BELGIANS<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> As practically the whole of Belgium was in the hands of the enemy, many wounded Belgians were cared for in French and British hospitals. Thus it was that a group of Belgians came to St. Dunstan's, where they remained during the whole of the War.



IT is Monday to-day, and returning from my lunch I find the Belgians seated in a corner of the crowded lounge, waiting for the concert to begin.

As usual, they have reserved me a place, for the concerts are popular, and late-comers have no chance of a seat.

"Late, as usual," mocks Emile.

"Bonjour, Emile. Bonjour, Camille. Bonjour, Maurice."

Breathlessly I shake hands with them, and gratefully squeeze myself on the settee between them.

The artists have already arrived. They are tuning their instruments.

Emile leans forward. He is not interested in music. He would much prefer to talk.

But I say: "Hush, Emile. We mustn't talk now. . . . You can tell me that funny story, later."

He laughs good-naturedly, and producing one of his giant cigars, proceeds to smoke with a flourish.

Camille works patiently at his basket, a wonderful

tri-colour basket which Emile, the Chatterbox, has told me is intended for me at Xmas.

Maurice is the only one who genuinely appreciates music. With arms interlocked, and a rapt expression, he drinks it in, like nectar.

Now he is listening to “the Swan,” by Saint-Saëns. His thoughts accompany the white bird on its stately journey, they drift along the surface of the water, listen to the rustling of the leaves in the willow, and reach the land where the sun sets crimson, purple, and gold. . . .

Maurice is happy, living in his dreams. He has forgotten the present : but as the last notes vibrate through the air, the frantic applause brings him back to reality.

Emile claps his hands enthusiastically, and bangs the floor with his stick. Half mockingly, he exclaims : “ Oh ! Wasn’t that beautiful ? ”

Camille is still working at his basket. Like Maurice, he too has been dreaming. But his thoughts are more concrete : they are of Roulers, a little village in Flanders, and of his farm; half hidden by trees, in the plain that has been invaded, and is now in enemy territory. . . .

He wonders what has happened to it. . . . What has been its fate. . . .

*CAMILLE*



## NEW Year's Eve.

A cloak of snow covers St. Dunstan's. The trees glitter in the frost, and diamonds sparkle in the grass.

Camille and I walk briskly, for it is bitterly cold ; the wind is in the east. The lake is frozen, and a blackbird, standing on a block of ice, looks as though carved in ebony. . . .

As we pass through the gate leading into Regent's Park, clumps of snow fall in thuds on the ground. The wintry landscape is like a Christmas card. . . .

I am not cold in my warm fur coat, but Camille has turned up his collar, and buried his hands in his pockets. His cheeks are red as apples, and so far we have not spoken, for he radiates contentment, and with him words are superfluous.

One thought alone has the power to upset his equilibrium : the thought of his farm and his people at home.

Each morning, when the post is distributed to the men, I hear him ask : "Is there anything for me ?"

and when he is told, "Not to-day, Camille," he is thoughtful, then shrugging his broad shoulders: "Well, perhaps to-morrow I'll have more luck."

To-day, on New Year's Eve, I would have given anything to be able to say, "Here is your long-awaited letter," but alas, when I looked in at the office, I too was told: "Sorry, there is nothing for Camille." . . .

Now he has slackened his pace, and, surprisingly, I hear him chuckle:

"Sister, don't worry about me any more. I HAVE HAD NEWS," and bursting into triumphant laughter: "That's why I wanted you so particularly to come for a walk with me to-day." . . .

His cheeks are crimson now, not with cold, but with happiness.

"The miracle happened last night. As Emile and I were talking in the lounge, suddenly I heard a voice calling me by my name. It was a gentle Flemish voice, and so paralysed with joy was I in hearing it, that I couldn't recall to whom it belonged.

"'Have you forgotten Aline Varenmaester?' asked the mysterious yet strangely familiar voice, and before I could reply, 'I come from ROULERS . . . I have seen your people, and they are all well.'"

He has come to a standstill. His countenance

*CAMILLE*

expresses unutterable bliss. Three times he repeats :  
“ She has seen them, and they are all well.”

“ Camille, how marvellous ! ” . . .

And when he has awakened from his ecstasy, and we have resumed our walk, for it is freezing in the wind, he informs me :

“ Aline Varenmaester comes from my village. She left us three years ago to enter a Convent, for she had had a big sorrow. When the War broke out and the Nuns were obliged to flee, they sought refuge in England, where they hoped to continue their wonderful work. On her way, Aline passed through Roulers. There she found many forsaken cottages ; whole families had fled ; but my people hadn’t deserted. She saw them, and they are all well.”

I am as thrilled at the news as Camille himself, and I ask : “ But how did Aline know you were at St. Dunstan’s ? ”

He smiles. “ That is part of the miracle. As soon as she arrived in England, she went to St. Thomas’s Hospital, where she became a nurse, and was welcomed for her experience. In the ward there were many wounded Belgians. . . . One of them, Hartmann, told her I was here. . . . We had fought on the Yser together, and had been hit the same day : he had both legs blown off . . . and I was shot in the head.”

*CAMILLE*

Camille pauses. His voice now is grave. "At the Convent, Aline was called 'Sister Magdeleine de L'Enfant Jesus,' so don't you think . . . don't you think it was HE Who sent her to me?"

Touched by his simple faith, I agree. "Yes, Camille . . . Surely it was HE."

And he explains : "Ever since I came here, I've prayed I might hear my people were safe . . . and now, you see, HE has answered my prayer."

*PAT*



THE King and Queen have invited the men to tea this afternoon, and they have left for Buckingham Palace.

To compensate me for staying behind, Ginger gave me his dessert, an apple and almonds ; Billy pretended to cry like a child who resents going to a party without his nurse, and I teased them for being all dressed up in their “Sunday Best !”

Pat alone has refused to go, and I find him in the lounge, lying on a couch, pretending to sleep.

Pat is an odd individual. He has the reputation of being “difficult, ungrateful, and selfish,” but I don’t believe he is as black as he is painted ; he is neurasthenic.

Passing in front of him, I casually ask if there is anything I can do for him. He stretches himself, opens his eyes, and yawning frantically : “God, yes, Sister. Take me out for a walk. I’m stifling in here.” As he rises to his feet, he is shaken by a cough, a ghastly raucous cough, legacy of the first asphyxiating gas-attack at Ypres. His battalion was the first

to experience this "modern means of warfare," so they were unprepared and practically annihilated. As soon as the fit is over, we go out into the open, and he takes deep breaths, as though he can never sufficiently fill his lungs with fresh air.

He slips his arm through mine.

"Do you mind, Sister, if we go to the Post Office ? I want to send some cigarettes to a pal at the Front . . . and register a letter. It's for the wife of another pal who has just been killed at Givenchy." Bitterly, he adds : "I couldn't go to the Palace this afternoon . . . not while the War's still on, and the lads are out there." . . .

"Surely they'd be the last to grudge you a little pleasure."

He scowls. "In the circumstances, it is no pleasure. . . . I'm not referring to this afternoon. I realise it's a great honour to be invited to the Palace. . . . But in general, why do people make such a fuss of us ? Take us to theatres, and concerts, and drives ?"

"Because in offering you their friendship and hospitality, they're trying to make up to you for all you've been through ; to show you their gratitude." . . .

"Gratitude ! I wish I could believe that ! Unfortunately, though blind, I'm not deaf." . . . And

scornfully he explains : “ Day after day, as I’ve sat in the lounge, I’ve observed your ‘ disinterested, grateful ’ people. . . . Down the room they come, staring at us as though we were animals at the Zoo. Then stopping in front of a particular man, they decide he’ll do ; they won’t be ashamed to take him out ; they’ll even enjoy parading him before their friends.” . . .

“ You’re quite wrong, Pat.” . . .

“ Pardon me . . . I know what I’m talking about ; being fairly presentable in my uniform, with my Military Cross, I’m in great demand . . . whereas old Podds, who’s in mufti, and Jimmy, who’s disfigured . . . they never get a chance.” . . .

“ You’re very sceptical.” . . .

“ I’m a realist. . . . Do you honestly think this zeal will survive the War ? Do you think we’ll continue to be heroes once we’ve returned to our homes ? . . . Now, we’re the ‘ fashion ’ ; we’re ‘ those dear brave lads who have sacrificed so much.’ . . . But how long will it last ? ”

“ I don’t know. . . . But I’m sure that if some are vain and superficial, if some revert to their old selfish ways, the majority will remember.”

“ You’re optimistic, Sister. . . . The majority will forget.” Then unexpectedly, he blurts out : “ Do you believe in God ? ” and before I can reply,

“ I don’t any more, because if he exists and tolerates this War, we’re better without him.”

“ I’m afraid we can’t lay this War to his account, Pat. If in our ignorance and folly we’ve sinned against his love, can we blame him for our suffering ? ”

“ But why *should* we always suffer ? ”

“ Perhaps suffering is the only way left to bring us back to him.”

Rebelliously, he asks : “ Can’t we ever escape, then ? ”

And I wonder : “ Do we really want to ? ”

He is silent for a moment, then volunteers : “ Once, I offered him my life as sacrifice . . . but he refused it.”

“ How, Pat ? ”

“ I was at the Front. Before every attack, I used to go to Mass. The day I was hit, I had a presentiment. I knew I’d be hit, but I didn’t mind. I was ready, for on my way back that day, I was filled with light, and death meant only going into the Light.” . . .

Surreptitiously, he brushes away a tear, and in an outburst of self-pity : “ Fool that I was. . . . Before sunset I was blind . . . plunged in utter darkness, and for the rest of my life I shall walk in darkness.”

“ But, Pat . . . ”

Angrily, he cries : “ Don’t tell me I can still see spiritually ! ”

"But, can't you? . . . surely it's only with our spiritual eyes that we can see God." And emboldened because he doesn't explode at once: "Why did you say he had refused your sacrifice?"

"If he had accepted it, the bullet would have killed me, it wouldn't have deprived me of my sight. . . . In losing THAT, I've lost everything. . . . At times, I feel as though I've even lost myself."

What can I say to this man in his despair? . . . Mercifully words of themselves come tumbling out: "Christ came to save that which was lost! . . . Pat, since you were willing to die for him, can't you LIVE for him instead?"



"Shall we have tea at Richoux?"

It is an hour later. We have been to the Post Office, and are passing the delicious pastry-shop in Baker Street. Pat agrees to my suggestion, and as our walk has made us hungry, we order ices, and cakes, and drink with relish innumerable cups of tea. He seems happy and talkative again, and on leaving insists on paying the bill himself. When I protest, he becomes angry, and taking a handful of silver out of his pocket, declares: "If you argue any more, I'll drink it all at the pub opposite." Knowing that he'd

carry out his threat, I give in, and in subdued silence, we return to St. Dunstan's. Now he is depressed. He hardly answers my questions, so once again, I try to disperse the clouds that have gathered round him.

"If you've nothing special to do on Sunday, Pat, why not come and spend the day with us at home? My people would be glad to make your acquaintance, and we could visit the Canadian hospital near by. . . . Who knows, you might come across some of your friends there?" And wickedly, I add: "You may come without your medals, or the bandage round your head . . . you may even come in mufti."

Surprisingly, he takes no offence at these remarks: on the contrary, he begs me not to make fun of him.

"When I go off the deep end, Sister, I don't always mean all I say . . . if you'll be patient with me, I'll make an effort to mend my ways. . . . I'll try to be good."



He visited us on Sunday, and won all hearts, for he was charming.

At the Canadian hospital, a great strapping fellow, Sergeant Dixon, strode up to him and clapped him on the back; they had known each other from childhood, and were so pleased at the encounter that they arranged

to go on the “spree” together, the following week.

When we parted, Pat thanked me for his “outing,” and asked if I had approved of his behaviour?

“I did, Pat. Why can’t you always behave like that? You’d be far happier, and far more popular, you know.”

“Popular?” he scoffed. “I’d simply hate to be popular” . . . and with disarming conceit: “What I want, is to be liked for what I am—and that’s a rough diamond!”

I couldn’t help laughing, for although he had spoken half in jest, he had described himself exactly: he is a rough diamond.



*JOLLY*



EVERY Friday we dance at St. Dunstan's. Gaily we whirl round the room, waltzing or fox-trotting, while the band plays lustily : "Pack up your troubles in your old kit-bag." And troubles are indeed packed away, while with increasing skill we avoid collisions and treading on one another's feet.



At eleven o'clock the dance is over. Dark shadows flit along the corridors. In Ward Eight, two or three men are already in bed, reading braille. Jolly is singing at the top of his voice, while Ginger and Tommy are playing sentimental melodies on their mandolines.

Through the open door, old Podds walks in. With outstretched hands, he shuffles along, stumbling against every obstacle he meets. As usual, he makes straight for the wrong bed, and Tommy greets him with :

### *JOLLY*

"Hi, Podds, you know yours is the fifth on the right." And when he steps in his perennial "apple-pie bed" and gets entangled between the sheets, Tommy will come to the rescue, and put it right for him again.

"Shrimp" and "Sardine" have not yet appeared. Dancing has made them so hot, that before turning in, they have gone for a stroll in the garden, to say "Cheerio" to the stars. Finding themselves locked out on their return, they giggle delightedly. . . . What a lark! . . . and climb into the ward through the window.

And now Jolly has stopped singing. The mandolines have been put away. . . . Old Podds snores peacefully.



While the men sleep, the moon is busy on her rounds. Curiously, she looks in at each window, gazing wistfully at each bed. Why is Number Three unoccupied? Intrigued, she scans the room, and to her consternation, discovers "Jolly" fully dressed, huddled up in a chair, his head sunk on his chest, asleep.

Why isn't he tucked up in bed, comfortably, like the rest?

### *JOLLY*

The explanation is, that Jolly is not only blind ; his right arm and the fingers of his left hand have been amputated, all except the little finger . . . . astonishing little finger that has learnt to read braille, typewrite, and even play tunes on the piano !

But he can't undress himself. So he has an orderly who puts him to bed, and if the orderly forgets, there is always someone willing to help. Once it was "Sardine" ; on another occasion "Shrimp."

But to-night, these two are out in the garden, and as no one else is available, Jolly just sits on a chair, and waits. . . . He lights a cigarette, joins in the chorus of a song, jokes with Podds who bumps into him. Then, gradually his head begins to nod ; his eyelids droop, and lulled by the sounds around him, he falls asleep.



The moon is indignant. Ignoring the remaining beds, she journeys on, determined to discover the man who has forgotten Jolly. At last, she reaches the orderlies' quarters, and peering in, sheds her disapproving light upon each face, until she finds the culprit.

Orderly Brown stirs uneasily.

He dreams he is in the midst of an air-raid. Planes

*JOLLY*

circle above his head, bombs explode around him . . . and he can see Jolly helplessly waiting for him . . . waiting . . .

The eerie moon shines pitilessly on Brown's face. He blinks, awakens in a sweat, and sitting bolt upright . . . REMEMBERS.

In less than a second, he is up, running as fast as he can in the direction of Ward Eight.

"Oh ! Jolly ! Has someone helped you, are you undressed ? But to his shame, he finds Jolly huddled up in his chair, still in his dark blue suit. Full of remorse, Orderly Brown picks the lad up in his arms, and gently as a mother carries him to bed.

Drowsily, Jolly enquires : "It's not yet time to get up . . . is it, Mate ?"

"No, Jolly . . . it's only three a.m. . . . But I forgot you this evening . . . will you forgive me?"

"Forgive ? What is there to forgive ?"

Jolly hasn't the least idea.

With a smile on his lips, he blinks his eyes, and, thankfully, drops off to sleep.

*BILLY*



**A** WINTER'S day, crisp and beautiful. Most of the men are rowing on the lake. I am waiting for Podds in the lounge, as I have promised to take him out for a walk.

The old clock on the terrace strikes twelve, and as he is more than half an hour late, which is most unusual for him, I turn to Billy and enquire : "Have you seen Podds this morning ?"

"Yes, Sister. He went out with his wife about an hour ago. . . . He was so excited, because she had come all the way to see him, from Liverpool."

Unconsciously I smile at the thought of the happy reunion, while Billy adds : "As Podds isn't here, can't I go out with you instead ?"

Billy is seventeen. He enlisted in the Navy, but was never on active service, for shortly after his vaccination, he became ill. He suffers from appalling headaches, caused by a tumour on the brain. He has large blue eyes that look at you with a troubled expression.

I sit in the arm-chair next to him.

" You know Doctor's orders, Billy. He doesn't want you to go out when it's cold, and to-day there's a north-east wind."

" But it would do me *GOOD*," he pleads. " I'll *DIE* if they coop me in all day, like this."

Big tears roll down his cheeks.

I sigh. " *Billy, be reasonable.*" . . .

He shakes his head pitifully, and I wonder why, since he suffers from an incurable disease . . . he is not allowed to spend his remaining days in peace ?

Sister May mercifully causes a diversion. She hails Billy cheerfully, a batch of letters in her hand. " *Billy, a letter for you !*"

" *For me ?*"

He is so astonished that his tears are forgotten. " *Are you sure it's for me ? I never get any letters. . . . I've not had three in my life !*"

Sister May laughs gaily : " Well, it's your name on the envelope. Ask Sister Violet to read it to you," and with a swish of her starched apron, she vanishes.

Billy turns to me eagerly : " Yes, read it, will you ?" and as I do so, his face lights up, for the letter is from his friend Michael, who invites him to stay at his home for Christmas. Billy can hardly believe his ears. He is an orphan, he has no family,

*BILLY*

he has always been alone in the world, so this is a treat beyond his wildest dreams.

“ Sister . . . let’s answer it at once.” And while I fetch paper and pen : “ Do you know, I suddenly feel quite well. My headache has gone . . . I could sing and dance for joy. Think ! In less than three weeks I’ll be with Michael.”

Yes, in less than three weeks. But the words find no corresponding echo in my heart. On the contrary, I am full of foreboding. I wonder what will happen to Billy during these next three weeks. God only knows ! But in the meantime he is happy, radiantly happy, so maybe that’s all that matters.



He was taken to Hospital last Friday. Nurse tells me there is no hope. Most of the time he is unconscious. It would be better for him to go. . . .

Now and then he opens his eyes, his haunting blue eyes, and says : “ Do you know, Sister, my sight is improving. I can see much better. I can see shadows . . . and light . . . ”



He can see shadows and light, but we shall never see him again, for he died last night.

*BILLY*

Nurse has just 'phoned me the news.

I feel cold. Instinctively I draw near the fire, where the flames crackle in the hearth, and sparks shoot out like small rockets.

How indifferent they are ! Only a few days ago, Billy was revelling in their warmth, listening rapturously to their song.

Now there is a lull. The crackling ceases, and in the dying embers I see a face outlined, Billy's face, smiling and happy. The flames wake up again, they resume their dance, they sing boisterously : "Don't mourn for Billy. He is happy, now. He is at peace. He is free." And they repeat, until I am convinced : "He is free . . . free . . ."

*MICHAEL*



THE door suddenly bursts open, and Sister May stands before me flushed and perturbed. She has discarded her V.A.D. uniform for a gay summer dress, but the expression of dismay on her face contrasts strangely with her festive appearance.

She asks : "Have you seen Michael ? . . . I can't find him anywhere . . . and I did want to say Good-bye to him."

"Good-bye ?"

"Yes . . . I've had a telegram from Paul. . . . He's coming home on leave. I'm meeting his train at 4.30." She hesitates, then : "I'll be staying with his people while he's in England . . . will you explain all this to Michael ? . . ."

"I'll explain. . . . But, you know, he's just gone to the oculist. . . . It's to-day Major Ormond will tell him whether his sight can be saved."

Her eyes fill with tears. "I know. I'd have given anything to be here when he returns. . . . Give him my love." And abruptly, she opens the door, vanishing as unexpectedly as she had appeared.

Thoughtfully I close the book I was reading, and my thoughts dwell on Sister May. What will she do when Paul proposes, as he is bound to this leave? Will she choose him who represents security, a life of ease, charming but commonplace . . . or Michael, with nothing to offer save his own sterling self?

★ ★ ★

Michael is one of the most delightful persons I know. Young, tall and handsome, he has fair hair and exquisitely chiselled features; but his greatest charm lies in the fact that, though loved by all, he has remained essentially unspoiled and simple.

Ever since his return from the oculist this afternoon, I have watched him laughing and talking with the other men, and he seems so happy that I feel sure his news must be good.

Now tea is over, I sit next to him in the lounge, and ask almost confidently: "Michael . . . what did Major Ormond say?"

He smiles apologetically . . . and with no trace of bitterness or self-pity in his voice: "Not much, Sister . . . except that in three months I'll be totally blind."

I feel so shocked I am as though struck dumb. Can I have heard right? I have always considered Michael

one of the hopeful cases at St. Dunstan's. He can see quite a lot, he can distinguish colours, and since others have recovered their sight . . .

"Oh, Michael, I'm sorry. I thought . . . I hoped . . ."

"I too hoped," he confesses with a whimsical smile, "but no doubt it's all for the best. I've three months to get used to the idea, then I'll make a fresh start, and begin a new life."

Shall I give him May's message? It might help. But his friend Billy, entering the lounge, calls out his name: "You there, Michael? . . . Come with me for a walk round the park?"

Instantly, Michael rises from his chair: "Right, Bill, I'm coming," and turning to me in his friendly way: "So long, Sister."

Together they go out by the French window, they skirt the terrace, descend the steps bordering the lawns, and disappear into Regent's Park. Michael's hand is round Billy's shoulder. He is the guide, and I think he always will *be* the guide, leading others by his gallant example, along the difficult path of life.



A few days later, he asks me to accompany him to a lecture on clairvoyance. He is passionately

interested in the subject—as he is in psychology and philosophy. After the meeting, while he is talking to some of his friends, I am introduced to the lecturer, whom I question diffidently.

“Tell me, these auras you were describing, can you actually see them? Can you look into people’s minds and read their thoughts?”

He considers me with benevolent amusement. “Indeed . . . and the spectacle isn’t always edifying . . . but to-night,” he adds, smiling at my embarrassment, “I was fortunate. My attention was arrested by a particularly beautiful aura, a rare and lovely sight; it was translucent with light, iridescent with every colour of the rainbow.” He points in the direction of Michael. “There’s its fortunate owner.”

“Fortunate?” I protest. “Don’t you know he’s blind?”

The lecturer shrugs his shoulders significantly: “He’s less blind than most of us. He has hosts of friends, he’s surrounded by a company of angels . . . Believe me . . . he’s all right.”

And parting from Michael that evening, and looking into his face, suddenly I know it’s true: however hard life may be outwardly for him . . . there’s no need to worry . . . he is all right.



*MICHAEL*

"Please, Sister, you're wanted on the telephone."

"Thanks, Brown."

I run into the hall and a minute later, lifting up the receiver, hear May's voice urgently saying : "Hullo !

. . . It's May speaking. . . . How's Michael ? . . . What news is there regarding his sight ?"

I explain the position as best I can, and as no comment is forthcoming, enquire about her news : "Are you happy, May ? Has Paul proposed ?"

"Yes. . . . I hated saying no, and hurting him, but I had to . . . because now I've discovered there's someone else."

"Oh, May . . . Who is the fortunate one ?"

She laughs happily. "Can't you guess ? No ? . . . Not now, I'll tell you as soon as I get back on Saturday."

She hangs up the receiver, and it is my turn to laugh, for I know quite well who is the fortunate one ! . . . I've known ever since I saw them together, for the first time, she and Michael.

★ ★ ★

Oh, Michael and May, it may be years before your dream comes true, but for God's sake, as well as your own, be happy !

The world has lost its belief in love, but you, who know it is the One Reality, let it shine forth in your lives, won't you ?



*SIR ARTHUR PEARSON<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> *Sir Arthur Pearson died as the result of an accident in 1921.*



**A**LTHOUGH many years have elapsed since the death of Sir Arthur Pearson, no picture of the early days of St. Dunstan's would be complete without mention of the man who was not only its Founder but the very embodiment of the spirit he wished to spread. Courageous, cheerful, and independent, he inspired in the men a desire to emulate his example. He was the Chief they respected, but because he too was blind, he had earned the right to be their friend, and when he spoke to them of "Victory over blindness," they knew he spoke of his own searing but triumphant experience.

At first, when there were only a few men, St. Dunstan's was just one big family of which he was the head, but when the number increased to a hundred, a thousand, and even more ; when huts sprung up around it, and annexes were added to it, it never lost this characteristic.

Sir Arthur used to say : "Don't think of this place as an Institution, Boys, think of it as your Home. Don't think of yourselves as 'different' from other people because you've lost your sight, but conquer

your blindness. It's not a misfortune, it's only a handicap."

And as he stood before them, informally, full of humour and kindness, he cheered the heart of every man. Because he made light of his troubles, they determined to make light of theirs. Stirred by the magnetism of his personality, they were endowed with a new dignity ; no longer was their affliction a calamity, but an opportunity.

Work was provided for all at St. Dunstan's. Manual work, such as carpentry, basket-making, rug-making, and boot-repairing. Poultry-farming for those attracted to outdoor life. Typewriting, shorthand, telephony. Massage for those with a sensitive touch, and braille for everyone.

When the day's work was over, there was no time to mope.

The men could row on the lake, go for walks, take part in various sports ; and indoors, there were dances, concerts, card games, chess and dominoes.

A stranger visiting St. Dunstan's for the first time received quite a shock on entering the lounge. Instead of the atmosphere of gloom and despondency he had expected, he was greeted with laughter, and songs, a gramophone shouting in his ears, men smoking and joking.

This was the St. Dunstan's of which the Chief had

dreamed, and he told the men : “ There’ll be no rules or regulations, save those you’ll make for yourselves.” They appreciated this, and he said : “ Don’t grumble or grouse. If anything is wrong, come to me about it. I’ll put it right, if I can.”

When they hesitated to add to his burden, he instituted the letter-box in the hall, into which grievances could be slipped. Once a week, it was opened, the grievances were aired, and being aired, they vanished and were no more.

Nowhere was there a place more democratic than St. Dunstan’s, for there the men were free to do as they pleased. All that was asked of them, was that they “ do unto others as they would be done by.”

When Sir Arthur died, suddenly, as the result of an accident, there was consternation at St. Dunstan’s. He had inspired such love and loyalty in every heart. The question anxiously asked, was : “ Who will carry on ? ”

But in his unerring foresight and judgment, the Chief had already chosen his successor, a young officer who was himself blinded in the war. With wisdom and devotion, Captain Fraser, now Sir Ian Fraser, shouldered his heavy responsibilities, and indeed St. Dunstan’s is fortunate to have as Chairman he who has carried out in such a wonderful manner the grand tradition of its Founder.









